

# *Mickey's Trailer* and Environmental Thought: Disney Cartoons and Countryside

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**Abstract:** *The influence of popular cartoons on environmental cognition is explored in this essay through readings of Mickey's Trailer, a 1938 cartoon directed by Ben Sharpsteen for Walt Disney. Other materials considered include Ford Motor Company's 1937-38 film coproduced by Wilder Pictures, Glacier International Park, which promotes motor-tourism and automobile ownership, and Ben Sharpsteen's other work for Walt Disney.*

*The article also examines the ideas of physical and "illusional" zoning in the city, especially the way that they were applied in the mid-twentieth century. Physical zoning involved separating incompatible land uses, whereas illusional zoning entailed seeing what you wanted to see. What does Mickey's Trailer say about how people can live, and can it inform where people choose to live? The essay muses that appreciations of nature and the environment are influenced by popular culture.*

**Keywords:** *Walt Disney, Mickey's Trailer, Cartoons, Popular Culture, Environmental Ideas*

"Oh boy, Whatta day," exclaims Mickey Mouse from the front step of his small house as Disney's 1938 short cartoon *Mickey's Trailer* opens.<sup>1</sup> Mickey is wearing a nightshirt and a nightcap, and rubs his hands in expectation. A white picket fence rings a perfectly domesticated, well-kept

1 *Mickey's Trailer* is available on *You Tube* at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=R86XY9lmtMs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R86XY9lmtMs). Thanks to the two blind reviewers, Markku Salmela and Mimi White, and to Brian Graham and Paul Richmond for their incisive comments and suggestions.

garden, with lawn and flowers. In the distance, the clear mountain air reveals pine trees, cool blue lakes, glaciated rocks, and snow-bedecked peaks shimmer in homage to the unspoiled wilderness of the west. The cartoon's cheery soundtrack adds to the feeling of happy harmony. A fall from grace, however, is only seconds away. In a series of images the camera settles on Mickey as he pulls a lever to set a transformation into motion. Over half a minute or so, the house morphs into a smaller trailer, which then opens to allow an auto to pop out with Goofy asleep in the back. The picture shudders with the rhythm of a machine. The trailer is hitched onto the auto and Goofy takes the wheel, the garden trees retract, shutters and awnings close, flowered window boxes disappear, and the lawn is drawn in like a carpet on a roll. The entire backdrop compacts together like a giant Spanish fan, leaving the vista, previously redolent of nature, obliterated.

As the cartoon continues, altogether more apocalyptic imagery emerges, revealing the trailer and its setting to be located in front of the "CITY DUMP." Vile effluent flows through a lifeless, barren creek. Smokestacks and grimy, rusty trains belch steam and fumes, power and telephone lines lacerate the sky; dirty factory buildings, miserable shacks, and broken fences burst into view. In the distance, skyscrapers thrust towards the heavens in a forlorn attempt to flee the wretched location. Not a single blade of green is in sight, nor any hint of life apart from the depraved remnants left by man and industry. No-one cares for this place, and no-one would want to live here. The image suggests the city landscapes described by turn of the century muckrakers and reformers—a debased landscape containing little or no hope. From here, the only way the plot can develop is elsewhere as there can be no resolution in this wasteland. The viewer's relief is palpable when Mickey, Goofy, and Donald drive away, off into the distance, to the left and the west. Spirits lift as the scene changes: the city recedes, and the road is lined by a white picket fence. Disney's three main characters cross meadows and high mountains in a journey that takes up the remaining six minutes of the cartoon, and, from reading the landscapes, the trip seems to traverse the continent.

*Mickey's Trailer* was directed by Ben Sharpsteen and was aimed at a general movie audience. Cartoons like *Mickey's Trailer* were sold and shown bundled with feature films in movie theaters across the nation. Over time, however, it has come to be viewed more as a child's cartoon and has been incorporated into various "Disney Show" iterations broadcast nationwide and worldwide. The postwar development of TV and the need for content

to broadcast gave cartoons a second lease of life, as by 1960 three-quarters of American homes had access to a TV. Substantial revenues could be garnered from the cartoon makers' archives (Telotte, 2008a, 101). VHS, DVD, cable, and on-demand broadcasting opened up Disney's back catalog to later generations. Today, cartoons like *Mickey's Trailer* are available across a number of platforms, including *YouTube* (Pallant, 343). While children have been somewhat underplayed as historical actors until recently, it is worthwhile to remember that yesterday's children are today's grown-ups. Broadcasting innovations, including streaming services, have increased the reach of "surrogate" parenting by cartoons like *Mickey's Trailer* beyond the supervision of adults (Fass, 21). Already by 1960, many people, and children in particular, were watching hours of TV programming a day (Mintz, 298), and were more exposed to ideas from visual popular culture than from most other sources. Some fifty years later, this exposure has increased and screen time has risen further.

This essay looks at how cartoons and promotional films represent city and country landscapes and sentiments to their viewers, and considers the potentially-lasting effects on the environmental sensibilities of audiences. It reflects on the meeting between city and idyllic non-urban landscapes in the late 1930s as expressed in *Mickey's Trailer*, *Glacier International Park* and elsewhere. It muses over whether the backdrop in *Mickey's Trailer* is a form of physically-segregated or psychologically-segregated zoning. What does *Mickey's Trailer* say about how people can live? Is it saying that you can zone, blot out what you do not like, and move on somewhere fresh? Is *Mickey's Trailer* a tale of hope, or of despair? Does it preach that the only solution to the mid-twentieth century urban dilemma is a flight from the city? What might impressionable minds make of *Mickey's Trailer* and other cartoons? Would this seven-minute cartoon leave them with enduring images of hope—or of trauma?

I suggest that appreciations of nature, environment, and lifestyle appropriateness can be influenced by films like *Mickey's Trailer*. This essay builds on work by Klein (1993), Telotte (2008a), Op de Beeck (2010), Goddard (2011) and others who explore the intersection of imagery and environmental awareness. Though viewers can distinguish fiction from reality, background images can be consumed repeatedly without much conscious thought. Materials from popular culture entertain and educate people from childhood on, especially if these images are consistent and woven into coherent cultural tapestries that tell corroborating versions of the same story.

The representation of landscapes in popular culture is clearly an important factor for environmental thinkers to bear in mind and is an issue which has not adequately been taken up. This essay connects to earlier work on understanding the growing attraction, appreciation and glorification of the city-close countryside (Goddard, 2012).

Popular culture stories told in film, line drawing, and type often show the modern city from skeptical and contradictory points of view. There are exceptions (comic books, for example), but the quantitative and qualitative weight of cartoons may appear to lean towards rural, small town, and pastoral depictions. Fundamental views on how people see the world are formed early in life and reinforced later: what we learn first, we learn deepest. This assumption suggests potency for the anti-urban imagery disseminated in popular culture. These images are important for how adults perceive their habitat, and more specifically, how the generations of kids growing up in a culture surrounded by visual imagery imagine ideal landscapes and accommodate to their actual ones.

Cartoons help frame one side of a problem. On the one hand, the metropolitan percentage of the US population roughly doubled during the twentieth century, from around 39.5% in 1900 to around 80.7% in 2013 (US Census).<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the stories Americans are told are often quite blind to or critical towards the city. Children in particular consume stories of spatial ideals relatively passively, as they have not yet had the experience to enable them to assess them in a mature manner. These spatial ideals mediated by popular culture endure, often in a subconscious, relatively unreflective, and uncritical way. One trace of this mismatch between imagined and known places emerges from indications contained in opinion polls conducted by The Gallup Organization and the PEW Research Center.

Gallup and PEW have carried out polling on respondents' lifestyle and place of living preference at regular intervals since the 1960s. These Gallup and PEW polls have been collected and presented in the table, "Residential Preferences in the US, 1966-2009." (See the table at the end of the article). Polls asked respondents whether they would prefer to live in cities, suburbs, small towns, or the countryside. Despite the metropolitan reality facing most Americans, the poll responses strongly suggest consistent pref-

2 In 1900 urban places were classified as having populations over 4,000. From 1910 to the present the definition of an urban place has been 2,500 people. Definitional changes 1900-1910 do not alter overall trend lines. <https://www.census.gov/population/www/censusdata/files/table-4.pdf>

erences for small towns and countryside. The results displayed in the table present an enduring and consistent bias in favor of small town and rural living among Americans.

US Census Bureau statistics, meanwhile, provide indications that more people are being drawn into urban areas. Note that the 1966-2009 period surveyed covers the postwar "televisual" period, in which many young Americans grew up in a world of film, cartoons, and TV. Thus, the poll results may show indications of attitudes formed during the televisual age from about 1940 onwards. Cities and suburbs (10,000 or more inhabitants) combined attracted the favor of less than 50% of respondents. Generally, the proportions of respondents who would prefer to live on a farm or in a rural place were somewhat higher than the proportion for those who would choose city life. Paradoxically, there is a fairly strong bias against living in the larger (100,000 plus) metropolitan areas, where most Americans resided.

Though Disney cartoons have often been seen as "conservative" media that reinforce existing modes of thought and action (Murray, xvi), the clash between the environmental imagery we see in images in our minds and that we see with our eyes is actually probably subversive. It is likely a factor in explaining the mismatched locational preferences displayed in the table: appreciations of the everyday environments surrounding them are subverted by cultural imagery in cartoons, etc. This would suggest one tentative explanation for Americans' metropolitan homes and non-metropolitan preferences.

Americans are taught to be sympathetic towards a kind of environment that is mostly an abstraction compared with where they live, and consequently probably fuels an "environmental dissonance" between lived and loved landscapes. Viewers are then tasked with dealing with this disharmony. Recall that cartoons like *Mickey's Trailer* have been seen by generations of viewers. *Mickey's Trailer* has flickered across the eyes of most adults at one point or another. While *Mickey's Trailer's* reflects the concerns of its moment of creation in the 1930s, audiences have seen the cartoon "out of time," or have projected it into their own time, though most audiences would probably not distinguish between the two. Critics debate the influence of cartoons in general and Disney in particular. One went as far as to suggest that cartoons were as influential as "mother's milk" (Short-sleeve, 27). Cartoons hold powerful sets of images for their viewers, much of which probably works through subconscious association.

While cartoons have seldom been seen as socially innovative, even supposedly conservative creators of cartoons like Disney Studios emerged from technological innovations in animation (Klein, 52). Around 1920, in the early years of animation, the rendering of moving drawn images by Disney and others was regarded as avant-garde and at the cutting edge of technological advance. As a new expressive art form with still-pliable conventions, animation allowed a great deal of artistic innovation and technical experimentation before it settled in the mid-1930s. At least part of this experimentation and then solidification was the result of the maturing technology employed. Innovations included sound, "Technicolor," and the multi-plane camera, so that cartoons could become increasingly realistic in their format as well as efficient in their production (Telotte: 2008b, 52). Though Disney's imagery could be described as nostalgic and backwards looking in terms of social message, it remained close to the cutting-edge in terms of technology. Together, these two factors helped win mass audiences and control costs.

### ***Mickey's Trailer in Detail***

The opening scene in *Mickey's Trailer* is deeply troubling as it unfolds. Seemingly untouched wilderness swathes the setting of the house/trailer. The idyllic location tugs directly at the viewer and reminds the viewer of the national parks of the west. Worshipping the natural, *Mickey's Trailer* begins with virgin mountain lands, a pure-looking lake, and blue skies. The trailer's sublime national park-like emplacement resounds with a celebration of the unspoiled wild. This setting is quickly understood by the viewer as an illusion, a sleight-of-hand trick as the backdrop folds into itself, accompanied by the relentless sound of mechanical work. By dividing uses according to their supposed compatibility, wilderness and industry were separated. For *Mickey's Trailer*, this saw ozone blues replacing grey-brown hues as Mickey, Donald and Goofy leave the industrial core for the wilderness. Mickey, our focal point, deliberately sets the audience up for a fall.

The opening campsite setting in *Mickey's Trailer* seems a case of illusory zoning once the transformation has been made. Unwanted uses are simply screened away, offstage, somewhere else, beyond our concern, and unseen. This zoning is a pretense, in that it denies a basic environmental interconnectedness. Space can be divided rationally and portioned off, to be invested with differential characteristics and understandings, with wasteland

and nature pulled apart. Who would want to camp in view of the dump and in the midst of its mire? Surely, smoke and effluent would seep around and under the backdrop? Could one compartmentalize waste away? For the story at least, as long as it was not there in the opening scenes, the dump did not matter.

By zoning, I mean the division of physical space according to use, in order to avoid the overspill and contamination of land use from one area to another. In the early twentieth century, industrial, commercial and residential land-uses began to be directed into specific and separate locations within cities. This entailed spatial segregation by use, based around conceptions that certain kinds of uses were incompatible with one another. An associated element of land use planning saw wilderness areas and other beautiful landscapes designated as national parks with stringent use restrictions. However, the zoning in *Mickey's Trailer* is unreliable; it is a mechanical trick that stresses "out of sight, out of mind." It is not the ugliness and effluent the city produces per se that is the problem, but the offensive image, the packaging, and not the content. Thus, perceptions are confused by presentation.

In *Mickey's Trailer*, something is troubling and ultimately wrong in the passage between the pristine and pestilential images. In the first sequences, the jarring of the two opposing images of city and wilderness is acute, with stark visual effect. The construction of the backdrop is rhythmically mechanical as it cranks in on itself to fold out of view. The tone of the images darkens as the wilderness scenery curtain disappears. Mickey's place in this setting is deeply-ambivalent: recall his initial, sunny line, "Oh boy, Whatta day!" There is a sense of utilitarian acceptance of the illusory situation Mickey finds himself in, the mechanized nature of the scenery and the necessity for motion, and of the clouds of smoke belching out of the exhaust of the car as it revs away. Of course, the car is in a way a product of the city, which in abstract terms made it, and on its way away from the resulting industrial "sink" city. Images of Detroit, then in its heyday, come to mind. Mickey's automobile helps Mickey and friends to take flight from the mess automobile production created.

So, far from being victims of deception, Mickey and Disney are agents of it—as are audiences and viewers. The city dump with its foul sewer persists off-screen in an illusory zoning, and wherever Mickey goes, we know it must still be there, even if it is no longer in view. Messiness is the price of progress, the price of the production of Mickey's auto and of the technol-

ogy behind the flickering of light across the film screen. Disney's animators connect the dump to real life. Cinematic film of the time used methylene chloride, silver nitrate, and other volatile, carcinogenic substances that caused severe and persistent pollution problems. Even if the images had been innocent, the materials used to create them were highly toxic. In December 1988 alone, a ruptured pipe at Kodak's Rochester, New York plant hemorrhaged around 30,000 gallons of methylene chloride, a solvent that can cause health problems (Foderato). Kodak was the nation's biggest commercial giant within the filmmaking industry, and its plants were among New York State's biggest industrial sites. Is there an oblique link between the illustrative dump in *Mickey's Trailer* and chemical pollution?

At a stretch, the imagination can see Kodak's dump in Mickey's dump. Rochester groundwater is still contaminated by chemicals and its ambience was presented as an "industrial tableau of gray smokestacks and thick white plumes," in the words of one *New York Times* journalist (Foderaro). These words could easily describe the cartoon city dump. Much more disturbingly, the *Mickey's Trailer* music continues its happy jingle without missing a beat as Mickey, Goofy and Donald motor off from the city to the left and westward, to greener narrative pastures. If this place, for example, Rochester, is unacceptable because human action, industry, modern life, and consumer living have caused it to become so, people can move someplace else. Indeed, like many northern cities with substantial industrial bases, Rochester's population fell sharply: from around 325,000 in 1940 to about 220,000 in 2013 (Office of the New York State Comptroller). These connections between industry, effluent, and city decline clearly suggest more complex layers to the environmental messages emanating from *Mickey's Trailer*.

Greenish, nostalgic shades seem to hover over *Mickey's Trailer*—combined with industrial smog and transience. Progress makes demands of our surroundings that we have to accept, even if we would prefer they were not there. The message of *Mickey's Trailer* and its production method certainly conflicted. One reason for Disney's success was its early investment and adoption of technology. Disney standardized technology in its films, organized itself hierarchically along factory lines, and allowed for concentration, specialization and lower costs in the production of its materials. Artistic endeavor became increasingly regimented within a production-line factory product. Technological and industrial progress, and, unfortunately, the ensuing pollution, made cartoons like *Mickey's Trailer* possible as a medium for mass consumption (Klein 1996; Telotte 2008a).



*Mickey's Trailer* advocates nature and pollutes it on film in a production at the same time. The industrial and the preindustrial/natural coexist uneasily. This is seen in the cartoon where the unbalanced marriage of technology and nature (already explicit in the dump/wilderness dichotomy) fails. Mickey, Goofy, and Donald fall victim to technology out of control as their car and the trailer separate (5:37), leaving the trailer, Mickey and Donald hurtling down mountain roads towards disaster in a collision with a locomotive in one direction, while the car and Goofy motor on oblivious in another. This “wobble” between technology and nature, a “rift” in paradise, recurs as a “gag” opportunity in early Disney productions (Telotte: 2010, 227). By happenstance, car and trailer are reunited (as the plot demands), and harmony is restored (7:26). Perhaps, there is a sense of the fairy tale over the film, as well as the proposition that if your heart is pure, things will turn out right—even if they do not turn out right for anyone left behind close to that dump in the city.

Yet, *Mickey's Trailer* is more sophisticated than a couple of visual jokes wrapped in a jingle. The film recorded the emerging phenomenon of motor-tourism through Mickey, Goofy, and Donald's tour into America's “natural” places after they leave the city dump. Multiple factors granted motorists the leisure to explore the country, including rising purchasing power for those in work, the increasing affordability and prevalence of automobiles, good roads, and the increase of dedicated vacation time. Automobile ownership and culture was encouraged by corporations such as Ford Motor Company in promotional and advertising films, in order to promote their products and increase sales. One of these promotional semi-documentary films, *Glacier International Park*, is particularly interesting. Nine minutes long and released in either 1937 or 1938, *Glacier International Park* was commissioned by Ford and coproduced by Wilder Pictures of Detroit to promote motor-tourism. *Glacier International Park's* scenery shots bear occasional striking resemblances to *Mickey's Trailer's* scenes.<sup>3</sup>

3 The precise date of the film has been lost, but it was probably produced in late 1937 or 1938. The auto is probably a 1937 Ford Model 78 body type 730-D de-luxe touring. Ford would have used a current model for the film for the greatest possible commercial impact. Thanks to the Early Ford V8 Club for help in identification of the model. The film is available online at: [https://archive.org/details/0831\\_Glacier\\_International\\_Park\\_15\\_42\\_10\\_00](https://archive.org/details/0831_Glacier_International_Park_15_42_10_00).

### Motor-Touring with Ford

From the first scene, *Glacier International Park's* narrator could be recounting the opening scene of *Mickey's Trailer*. This short promotional documentary includes film sequences of grand Rocky Mountain nature, pure lakes, stunning summits, snow, and idyllic recreation locations seen from the road. The viewer sees places where "majestic forest-covered peaks rise on every side....the water comes tumbling down" and "the ground is covered in flowers" (3:30). All this is "within easy reach of our transcontinental highways" (8:40). By riding the highways, late-thirties' motorists could pack up the kids and leave urban, industrial America behind to commune with and consume from the recently-protected wonders of the national parks. To be fair, *Glacier International Park's* motor-tourists start out from a suburban neighborhood rather than the obviously polluted cityscape of *Mickey's Trailer*.

There are no city dumps in this wonderland. Dipping deeper, *Glacier International Park's* unseen narrator promises limitless opportunity. Motor tourists could "do all the things" they had never been able to do (0:20) and repeat the journeys of their ancestors by driving west to the national parks in their cars on fine roads to visit preserved wilderness. There, the motor tourist could go as he pleased (6:50), unburdened by the rules, regulations, and conventions of city life. The motorized vacationer could get "Far away from the frictions and troubles of a busy world" to a place where "peace and quiet reign supreme" (6:50). Although the fresh start in *Glacier International Park* may have been fleeting, it promised hope and a place of recreation for motorists and their families.

Ford Motor Corporation's messages were meant to persuade adults to buy cars and enjoy them via motor-tourism, in a motors, roads, and great outdoors complex. *Glacier International Park* clearly reflected the emerging leisure phenomenon also taken up in *Mickey's Trailer*. This phenomenon precisely crossed the initial *Mickey's Trailer* rift between the metropolis and the mountains, where, the narrator claims, "everything is as nature intended it" (4:20), rather than the manmade and thus fallen cityscapes of home. Further, motor-tourism is described as easy and "accessible by good roads and trails" (5:03). Note that *Glacier International Park* represents a city view of nature, as a place of leisure, to view and enjoy rather than as a place of labor. While *Mickey's Trailer* is decidedly anti-urban in its imagery, *Glacier International Park* is more pro-country and wilderness.

*Mickey's Trailer* and *Glacier International Park* connect in time as they were filmed within a couple of years of each other. These two films suggest

there is a youthful and attractive vigor in nature, woods, and forests. Where the city represents nature dis-encharmed and aged, wilderness remains in an innocent state, largely untouched by human time. Of course, that motor-tourism also acted as an agent to transform pristine nature into an object of consumption by a fossil fuel economy was a bitter consequence of the promotion of motor-tourism in both films. The two films observe the phenomena of motor-tourism and respite in nature virtually simultaneously. *Mickey's Trailer* and *Glacier International Park* suggest an interconnected collage of pictures as the action in both films flows from the city to harness the redemptive powers of nature.

### **Ben Sharpsteen, Director**

Ben Sharpsteen directed *Mickey's Trailer's*. Sharpsteen worked for Disney from the twenties to the late sixties, and directed twenty low-budget short "Silly Symphony" cartoons for Disney from 1934 to 1938. From the late 1930s, Sharpsteen gained renown. Sharpsteen co-directed *Pinocchio* in 1940 and *Dumbo* in 1941. He also worked on *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* in 1937 and *Fantasia* in 1940. Sharpsteen received critical acclaim and a first prize for animation at the 1941 Cannes Film Festival for *Dumbo*. He also won two Oscars for directing documentaries, a turn his career took in the 1950s as animation lost popularity. This sense of documentary unites *Mickey's Trailer* and *Glacier International Park*. In *Mickey's Trailer*, it is there in the detail Sharpsteen provided for the dump scene and in the understanding of motor-tourism that quite clearly emerges in the confluence between *Mickey's Trailer* and *Glacier International Park*.

*Mickey's Trailer* shares a nostalgic embrace of rural society with many other of Disney's seventy-odd seven-minute Silly Symphony cartoons (Wilson, in *Shortsleeve*, 7). Disney's short cartoons cost relatively little, produced good and rapid returns, and provided durable entertainment and receipts. Critics have detected in *Mickey's Trailer* the deliberate rejection of the city by Disney, in favor of the imagined utopias that were later worked into Disneylands. Critics see a strong Jacksonian and anti-city intentionality running through the cartoons. This anti-city intentionality requires further exploration (*Shortsleeve*, 7).

Providing more detail, the twenty Silly Symphonies that Ben Sharpsteen directed shared common features with *Mickey's Trailer*, not least the predominantly rural backdrops. Most center on the Mickey, Donald, and

Goofy trinity. *Two-Gun Mickey* (1934) takes place in the southwest, with no urban elements. *Mickey's Service Station* (1935) is set in a country location on a highway.<sup>4</sup> The action in the *Cookie Carnival* (1935) transpires against a fairy-tale, perhaps Middle-European background. *Mickey's Fire Brigade* (1935) plays out against a blaze city-edge rooming house. *On Ice* (1935) involves skating sequences on a frozen pond against a full countryside backdrop completely absent of buildings. *Cock o' the Walk* (1935) suggests the town as a nineteenth-century farmyard. *Broken Toys* (1935) presages *Mickey's Trailer* by starting at a fly-tip (a prototype dump). Cast-off toys repair themselves and then traverse a snow-bedecked winter wonderland landscape to delight orphan children.

*Orphans' Picnic*, meanwhile, (1936) tells the story of a country day out to picnic grounds for the wards of an orphanage, again with no urban imagery beyond their transport. *Moving Day* (1936) has Mickey, Donald and Goofy about to be evicted from their city-edge home by a rapacious landlord. As in *Mickey's Trailer*, the three characters have all their worldly needs piled onto wheels: an ice truck in which they motor away and escape their eviction order. *Mickey's Circus* (1936) portrays a free Orphans'-Day visit to the big top, without the overall location being more specific. *Donald and Pluto* (1936) revisits the orphan theme, this time with what seems a suburban or small town setting. *The Worm Turns* (1936), with Mickey as an alchemist, plays out against a suburban, possibly Californian backdrop, with a "NO DUMPING" reference at the end. *Don Donald* (1937) plays out in the dry Southwest or Mexico, with Donald driving a car similar in conception to that in *Mickey's Trailer*.

*Hawaiian Holiday* (1937) has Mickey, Minnie, Donald, Goofy, and Pluto frolicking in the Pacific surf, again with no visual references to towns or cities. *Clock Cleaners* (1937) is the most urban of the Sharpsteen shorts. The storyline plays out on a soaring clock tower in which Mickey, Donald and Pluto are enthralled by a cartoon mechanical world that ends up controlling their bodily movements. *Pluto's Quin-Puplets* (1937) has Pluto as a father of five puppies with a large yard to play in. The setting suggests a small town. In *Boat Builders* (1938), Mickey and friends build a boat from a kit in a harbor location. However, the boat disassembles into kit components in the final scene, reminiscent of the nature-to-dump backdrop transformation at the beginning of *Mickey's Trailer*. *Polar Trappers* (1938) places Donald

4 *Two-Gun Pete* and *Mickey's Service Station* are in black and white, while the remaining films are in color.

and Goofy in a frozen polar landscape where food and other means of survival must be brought in.

Sharpsteen's last short before moving on to feature film direction was *The Fox Hunt* (1938), featuring Donald and Goofy again, where an English-type country landscape coexists with American fauna. Again, the imagery completely lacks urban components.<sup>5</sup> Sharpsteen's catalog plays out in small town, countryside, and hinterland locations. Most of these twenty films are set somewhere between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth. Seen in relief against the body of Sharpsteen's work, *Mickey's Trailer* is not an aberration.

The documentary strand in *Mickey's Trailer* probably came relatively easy to Sharpsteen. It was allied with Disney Studios' emerging hyper-realist school in which images were never shepherded accidentally but always considered. Hyperrealism highlights the attempt at a "plasmic" realism used in character depictions, with the incorporation of visual trick to stretch the imagination. Examples in *Mickey's Trailer* include the trailer's wheels grasping for grip (5:51) as they hang over precipitous drops.<sup>6</sup> There is a fascination with humanizing, mischievous technology, seen in *Mickey's Trailer* in the anthropomorphic auto and trailer, though there is also a lack of recognition that the technology and industry that created auto and trailer helped form the dump backdrop.

### Reflecting on Disney

Looking back at the late 1930s, observers have argued that much of the cartoon worlds served as escapism from a flawed, failed, or incomplete modernity (Klein, 114). In uncertain times with economic hopes limited and social positions in flux, Disney Studios harnessed nostalgia for the near-past. Yet direct contemporaries saw the organization's production as creative. Sergei Eisenstein argued, presumably in earnest, that the work coming out of the Disney Studios was artistically significant. For Eisenstein it presented "the greatest contribution of the American people to art" (Watts, 90). This art ultimately found juvenile audiences.

Technology and nostalgia fused together incompletely in what more recently has been claimed as sentimental modernism (Watts, 85), where

5 Sharpsteen's Silly Symphonies are readily available on *You Tube*.

6 A notable example is the use of anthropomorphized fire in *Mickey's Fire Brigade*.

the nineteenth century “ideal of a life lived close to nature and the soil... of country and village life...(and) self-reliance” ran strong (Hofstadter, 12). New technology permitted innovative films speckled with nuggets of nostalgic renderings of earlier American life. Initially, Americans rushed from their rural pasts to chase better prospects in the cities, and once there and prosperous, seemingly regretted the choices they had made. Arising partly as commentary in response to the economic, social, and technological transformations of the 1930s, *Mickey's Trailer* drew in audiences. These audiences were often primed to understand comic content by exposure to earlier, similar cartoons.

From the 1960s onwards Disney suffered often-correct charges that the studio's works presented simplistic narrative flattenings and manipulations of truth.<sup>7</sup> Critics held that Disney's output worked as handmaidens of American imperialism, revealed the workings of a totalitarian mind, and represented apologies for the effects of capitalism, with racism, sexism, anti-laborism, and anti-communism added in. Further commentary argued that Disney pandered to popular taste (Shortsleeve, 1-3). While many of these complaints may seem persuasive, other observers were less negative (Watts, 85; Telotte, 2008a, 20). They note that millions of viewers, and children in particular, enjoyed Disney cartoons, and that Disney-the-man was lauded among critics for the animation of his fantasies. Disney might not have been pleasant to work for, may have run his company as a personal fief, and controlled production output. However, recall that this essay's task was to think about the way that animation portrayals may have held wider influence and perhaps reflected anti-urbanism inherent in American culture. Cartoons from the early years of animation like *Mickey's Trailer* still fascinate viewers of all ages.

The message of the imagery at the beginning of *Mickey's Trailer* is unmistakably strong. The film portrays Mickey, Goofy, and Donald as child-like innocents in the world. Thus, there is a powerful appeal to younger audiences. The city is, or at least can be, a markedly less satisfying environment for people. Countryside and preserved wilderness lay an easy drive away for rubber tires on smooth highways. While playing in a city dump might have been an adventure, its environment would have been unsavory

7 For example, Disney's Bicentennial “American on Parade” reduced American history to its least contentious elements. See Goddard (2013) for more details on the role of Disney in the 1976 Bicentennial celebrations.

and probably downright dangerous. It would have been far better to tumble and play in greener pastures and soak up the restorative powers of nature. Urban parents were thus encouraged to take their offspring on a recreational motor-tour of the nation's unspoiled natural gems (laced on a motorized string), rather than to leave them to the perils of urban surroundings. Further, at this time children were considered more sensitive to the benefits of nature, while also more susceptible to the blight of the city.

Overall, then, it appears that *Mickey's Trailer's* preoccupation with the past and fascination with the future ends in a form of confluence where the two meet: in the minds of the audience. There is a sense of passage and moral, in the troubled split between the perils of city life and industry and the ability to move on if conditions in one place become unacceptable. Certainly, place-of-living preferences do not seem to match actual places of living, with a substantial proportion of people who are not living in the small towns and countryside where they say they want to be. As historians and others have noted, cartoon stories have strong explanatory power in the ideas that get passed on to their consumers. One film historian noted, probably accurately, that Mickey is "unquestionably the most broadly marketed film image of the Twentieth Century" (Klein, 55), and had universal appeal which transcended race, class, age, and location. Mickey has been a constant companion of cartoon audiences for three generations, as a friend and role model. *Mickey's Trailer* was not an outlier in its city-hostile pictures, but broadly in keeping with other cartoons produced by Disney Studios in the 1930s. The imagery it contained is also reflected in promotional film as we saw with Ford's *Glacier International Park*. In this instance, it seems that the cartoon and promotional images interwove into coherent and corroborating tapestries. If ubiquity indicates influence, materials from popular culture like *Mickey's Trailer* probably do exert an influence on people's tastes.

It is difficult to assess precisely what effects cartoons and promotional films might hold. Still, the images in *Mickey's Trailer* tug the viewer's attention even when the film is seen once and in isolation. Cartoons like *Mickey's Trailer*, however, are often viewed repeatedly, and alongside other similar cartoon materials, gaining impact through repetition and depth through promotional materials like *Glacier International Park*. Our views of the environment in general and preferred environments in particular are probably influenced by what we see. Thus, the popular culture imagery we consume matters.

**TABLE: Residential Preferences in the US, 1966-2009**

Location/Year	1966	1970	1972	1976	1985	1989	1998	2009
City, population over 100K	22%	18%	13%	13%	22%	19%	15%	23%
Suburb, small city, 10K-100K	28%	26%	31%	29%	29%	24%	25%	25%
Small town or village under 10K	31%	31%	32%	20%	23%	34%	36%	30%
Farm or rural location	18%	24%	23%	38%	25%	22%	24%	21%
All places over 10K	50%	46%	44%	42%	51%	43%	40%	48%
All places under 100K	77%	81%	86%	87%	77%	80%	85%	76%
All places under 10K	49%	55%	55%	58%	49%	56%	60%	51%
Urban population as percentage of total US population (see note)	63%	73%	N/A	74%	N/A	75%	79%	81%

**Sources:** George H. Gallup (1972) *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935-71* (Vol. III), New York: Random House, Volume III, pages 1996 and 2238; George H. Gallup (1978) *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1972-77* (Vol. I & II), Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc., pages 78 and 112, and Vol. II, p.914; George H. Gallup (1979) *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1978*, Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc., pp. 83-86; George H. Gallup (1979) "Urban America-A Special Gallup Report," in *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1978*, Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc., p. 83-86, Released March 2; George H. Gallup (1981) "Urban Problems Special Survey" in *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1981*, Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc., pp. 82-83; George Gallup, JR. (1986) "Ideal Place to Live" in *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1985*, Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc., pp. 64-65; George Gallup, JR. (1990) "America's Large Cities" in *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1989*, Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc., pp. 207-9; and George Gallup, JR. (1999) "America's Large Cities," in *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1998*, Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc., p. 238. "For Nearly Half of America, Grass is Greener Somewhere Else," (2009) *Pew Research Social and Demographic Trends*. Jan 29.

**Notes:** Urban population statistics courtesy of US Census Bureau online, rounded up to nearest whole percent. Note that the US Census takes place every ten years. Thus, 1966 urban percentage is actually from the 1960 Census; the 1976 urban percentage is actually from the 1980 Census; the 1989 urban percentage is actually from 1990; the 1998 urban percentage is from the 2000 Census; and lastly the 2009 urban percentage is from the 2010 Census. N/A=Not available, K= 1,000. Lastly, note that the Gallup/Pew urban definition (10,000) and the US Census definitions (from 1910, 2,500) are different. Although a direct comparison cannot be made with these differences, an indicative comparison is still valid.



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